Museum of Australia — new concepts — new techniques

• A facsimile of a North Queensland rainforest — complete with living native animals and plants
• A simulated Australian sea shore
• An Antarctic environment exhibit

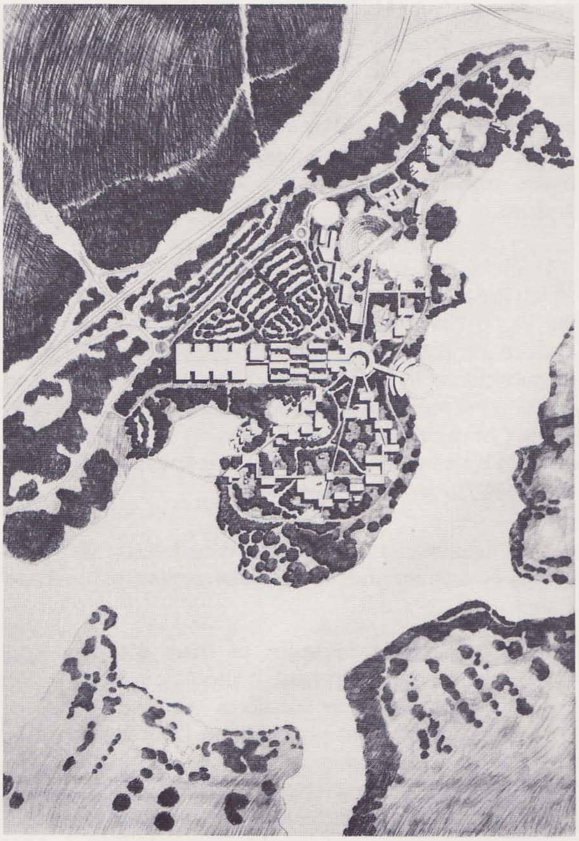
These are some of the exciting possibilities under consideration for the new Museum of Australia, scheduled to be open in five years or so. They were described by Dr D. F. McMichael, Museum Director and guest speaker at the Annual General Meeting of the Royal Zoological Society held last September.

Under the title 'The Museum, The Fauna and the Flora of Australia' Dr McMichael described some of the ideas derived from Britain, Europe and North America during an overseas tour made last year by himself and Mr Greg Deas, Chief Architect of the National Capital Development Commission.

"We could simulate the sea-shore, as has been done in the British Columbia Provincial Museum, or, the Antarctic Environment, as has been done at Sea World, San Diego" he said, "I suggest that only insufficient imagination, and to a lesser extent, money can limit the potential of the Museum for this type of display.

"I believe the use of new technologies will significantly enhance the possibilities for displaying some aspects of Australia's biological history. In particular I would like to see audio-animatronic models used to illustrate the great Pleistocene fauna of Australia.

"Just imagine passing through a time tunnel in which accurately modelled, life-size, moving re-creations of such genera as Diprotodon, Protemnodon and Thylacoleo were presented in a simulated Pleistocene landscape.



The Yarramundi site reserved by Lake Burley Griffin in Canberra for the Museum is 88 hectares in size, and is bounded by the Tuggeranong Parkway and Lake Burley Griffin.

"I can see great possibilities arising from the use of computers, video display units, and especially video-disc technology, in providing visitors with access to an exceptional array of information about Australia's flora and fauna" he said, and continued:

"For example, anyone interested in identifying a particular species that he or she may have seen might, by interrogating a simple 'user-friendly' computer keyboard, be able first to come up with and then see, all the likely possibilities through video-disc, colour photographs or even moving pictures, of the various species.

"Although the size of the site of the new museum in A.C.T. is large enough for both traditional museum displays of flora and fauna, and an array of captive or free animals in traditional zoo type exhibits, this is not thought to be a desirable approach" Dr McMichael told the meeting.

"Instead, we will undertake intensive plantings of native species to provide habitats which encourage the maximum diversity of native mammals and birds, especially waterbirds" he said. "We may eventually construct special facilities, such as a nocturnal house to display an array of native mammals which would not otherwise be seen by visitors, and we may maintain an array of native reptiles, amphibians and fish in terraria and aquaria".

Dr McMichael outlined the developments and planning which led to official approval for the Museum stating that the Pigott Committee's 1975 report on 'Museums and Collections in Australia', had been largely neglected since its publication. In 1980 an Act of Parliament was passed creating the Museum of Australia as a Statutory Authority of the Commonwealth and authorising it to undertake an array of musem functions, along the lines suggested by the Pigott Committee. These were:

The Museum was, first and foremost, to be about the history of Australia and the Australian people; as the report stated:

> 'Essentially a Museum of man and the Australian environment, it should consist of three themes or sections, each linked intellectually and physically to the other at appropriate points . . . one theme should embrace the environment — land and sea, geology, flora, fauna and climates. Another theme or section should cover Aboriginal history stretching over some 40,000 years. A third linked theme should cover the history of Europeans in Australia".

Recognising the need to avoid duplication of existing institutions, the Committee report stated:

> "It is an inescapable conclusion that much of the history of man in Australia — whether the Aborginals' remarkable harvest of herbs and plant foods, the pastoral rushes, and, the gold rushes of the nineteenth century — is tied to natural history.
>
> "A museum integrating environment and people eventually became the obvious solution. Such a museum would in no sense, duplicate any existing institution."

Dr McMichael said: "The Museum of Australia Act 1980 charges the Museum with developing, maintaining and exhibiting a national collection of historical material — defined as material relating to Australian history — which includes:

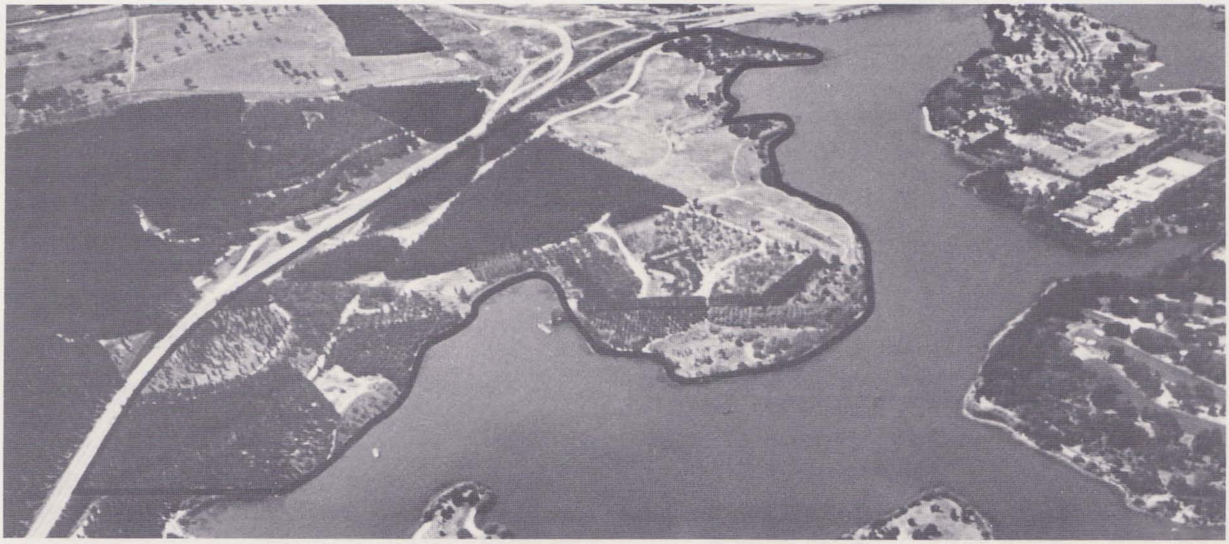
a) the natural history of Australia.
b) the history of the interaction of man with the Australian natural environment.

In simple terms, that means that the Museum is legally entitled to collect and exhibit natural history material, to collect objects related to the interaction of man with the Australian natural environment, and, to tell the story of that interaction".

The Government appointed an Interim Council, chaired by Sydney businessman, Alex Dix and including Mr Peter Pigott as its Deputy Chairman, to advise on how the Museum should be developed. The Council completed its Report towards the end of 1982, but owing to the elections called at that time, its release was delayed until March 1983 when the new Minister, Mr Barry Cohen, took office.

Dr David Ride, vertebrate zoologist and palaeontologist and former director of the Western Australian Museum was a member of that Council as was Dr McMichael. "There was a good deal of discussion within the Council as to whether the new Museum should establish natural history collections" Dr McMichael told the meeting, "One factor which significantly influenced the discussion was the attitude of the CSIRO . . . None of the CSIRO Divisions wanted their collections to be taken over by the Museum of Australia, and the Government endorsed this view", he said.

Nevertheless, the Interim Council felt that the Museum should not altogether close off the possibility of developing its own taxonomic collections. Its draft Collections Policy included the following: 'Having regard to the fact that all Australian States and the Northern Territory have



View of Site: An aerial view of the 88 hectare site reserved for the Museum at Yarramundi in Canberra. Bounded by the Tuggeranong parkway to the north and west, and Lake Burley Griffin on the east and south, the gently undulating site has great potential for the Museum. Two wetland inlets at the northern and southern ends add considerably to the value of the site as homes for wildlife of many varieties.

established museums primarily collecting natural history specimens, and that within the Australian Capital Territory there are a number of institutions actively collecting a variety of animal groups and plants, the Museum will not, **at this stage,** establish collections of animals or plants for taxonomic research. Should the policy of those institutions at present establishing and maintaining taxonomic collections change, the Museum reserves the right to accept responsibility for those collections and to develop taxonomic collections'.

'The Museum will in any case, acquire such plant and animal specimens as are necessary to provide a general reference collection of the Australian fauna and flora, to assist in identification of specimens for displays, for use in research, and, to aid the local Canberra community in identification of fauna and flora generally'.

The Interim Council completely endorsed the views of the Pigott Committee about the importance of integrating the Museum's treatment of human and environmental history, and wrote:

> 'Since all human activities occur within an environmental framework, the Museum's work and displays on the Australian environment will provide many opportunities for developing cross linkages with other themes. The Museum will deal with hundreds of millions of years, during which Australia gained its form and moved to its present position. It will deal with the great events that shaped Australian landscapes; with geology; with the soil and climate that allow forests and crops to grow and kangaroos and sheep to graze'.

"The argument for a major display of Aboriginal history is overwhelming", Dr McMichael said "If the human history of this country were to be marked on a 12-hour clock face, the era of white man would run for only the last three or four minutes . . .

"Justification of a major pavilion on the history of Europeans in Australia is also strong . . . older State museums have usually lacked funds to collect adequately in that field; moreover they have been oriented more to natural sciences, though occassionally they have built up valuable collections in facets of applied science and technology.

"It is fair to say that, so far, no museum in Australia has attempted, even on a moderate scale, to depict the history of Australia since the coming of the British", he emphasised.

"Other aspects of the living environment will be considered; the plants and creatures so different from the organisms of other continents, which have set Australia apart as a land of natural wonders; 'the living fossils' which have made Australia a key to understanding the life of past ages. It will look towards the next 200 years and show the need to integrate conservation and development."

(continued next page)

juniors' journal

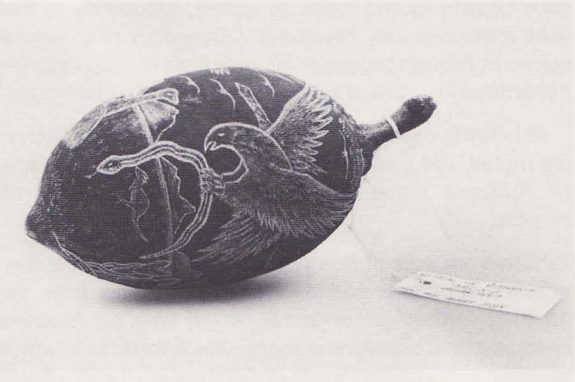
Hi! to everyone

A Great Year! A Merry Christmas! A Lively 1985!

(from previous page)

A number of colour slides shown to the meeting illustrated fascinating plans for the future, the interesting collection of artefacts already installed for the European settlement of the country, and some general views of the landscape set aside for the Museum.

When the Museum opens in five years or so, Dr McMichael indicated the displays should "achieve new heights in explaining inter-relationships of man and his environment. It will thus play a very important role in educating its visitors, especially those who are Australians, in the principles of conservation and sustainable development, which are now and will continue to be of fundamental importance to the future well-being of this land" he concluded.



Boab Nut: Carved boab nut from Derby, W.A., c. 1975, donated to the Museum in 1985 by Mary Fox. Artist unknown.

Well, we have had a great year, with our numbers growing quite large. We only have one meeting left then the year will be over again:

14 December — Christmas Party

Unfortunately, the children from Stewart House will not be coming along because they will have returned home for the school holidays. You will be going down to the vet block for your December meeting and then back to the Education Centre for your party, which I am sure all will enjoy.

We had a good trip to Dubbo, as you will be able to read in Jodi's article on our visit.

Please don't forget — there will be **no** meeting in January because of the School Holidays. However, I will be looking forward to seeing you in February, on Saturday the 8th, for our Planning Meeting.

Bye for now, and a very Merry Christmas. **Joanne Brydon, Chairperson.**

DUBBO TRIP 1985

by

Jodi Blackburn — 8 years old

We left Sydney on Sunday morning at 8.00 a.m. and travelled on the XPT to Dubbo. It took 6½ hours to get there. When we arrived at Dubbo we were met by Joanne and Ron who took us to the Wambangalang Field Studies Centre, where we spent three days and nights.

On Monday, we went to the Western Plains Zoo and spent the whole day there. I rode a bike around the Zoo and I saw some cape hunting dogs and many other animals. A good thing about the Zoo is that all the animals are free to roam in fields and are not caged. We followed some Kangaroos through the trees and patted an emu. As we were about to leave we spotted an echidna digging in the soil. On Tuesday we went to Mount Arthur in Wellington, where everyone went for a very long walk, then we went down the road and stopped at a cleared area and we had lunch. After lunch we went to visit the animals at Wellington caves.

On Wednesday, we went back to the Zoo and had a look at the vet clinic and saw a baby wombat. After that we had one last look at the Zoo and then went to the station to go home again. We arrived back in Sydney at 9.30 p.m., everyone was very tired, but we all had a good time.